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The Social Media Political Subject Is an Infant

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Abstract

Any random sampling of a Facebook timeline or Twitter feed, to take the obvious examples, provides a prepackaged view of global politics. It is restrictive because we choose it to reflect our own pet subjects, groups, likes, and world interests. The lens is prejudiced to reflect our race, class, gender, sexuality, ideology, and affective positionality. We enter a social media world as many as 10 or 50 times a day that has ourselves as the center of the universe. This communication world is similar to an infant's world: Someone else decides what we can see, what we can consume, what is that extra treat we can earn, if we are good: in social media terms, if we pay for it by reputational capital, or simply, if we spend enough money.

Keywords

social media, political, subject

Digital inequality tied to socio-economic factors; censorship exercised according to political, cultural, and ethno-religious targeting; collect-it-all surveillance by governments for security and corporations for profit; and the emerging and established media ownership's continuous complicity with capitalism, all ensure that social media experience is sanitized, skewed, re- and premediated.

Any random sampling of a Facebook timeline or Twitter feed, to take the obvious examples, provides a prepackaged view of global politics. It is restrictive, beyond the predetermined algorithms, because we choose it to reflect our own pet subjects, groups, preferences, and world interests. The lens is prejudiced to reflect our race, class, gender, sexuality, ideology, and affective positionality. We enter a social media world as many as 50 times a day that has ourselves as the center of the universe. This communication world is similar to an infant's world: Someone else decides what we can see, what we can consume, and what is that extra treat we can earn, if we are good: in social media terms, if we pay for it by reputational capital, or simply, if we spend enough money.

In the social media world of the infant, we—as in motivated human agents—deliberate protests and revolutions, insurgencies and terrorism, local or national political events, and themes surrounding nationality, gender, religion, and ethnocultural debates. We feel part of communities; we love, cry, sext, break up, make enemies, keep in touch with friends, organize, and coordinate teleologically tamed revolutions. Nevertheless, we do not recognize our own feelings, how our opinions are manipulated, we have no way of knowing how

the stories we share affect others around us, and often, we have no idea who is able to monitor our online activities and for what purpose.

The social media political subject is an infant. Illogically and immersively, when we are in social media networks, we forego vital cognitive functions, pretty much like the beer goggles that make everyone look desirable. We are desperately addicted to the affective structures that demand to be fed with what our friends, colleagues, relatives, acquaintances, and sponsored material throw at us. We are powerless to question how it is that civil association is taking place in networks built for commercial association. At least an infant is supposed to be constantly protected by its parents. The social media infants, that we are, expect this protective function to be provided by national representatives in the form of governments, tech corporations and commercial actors in the form of social responsibility, and international and non-governmental organizations who we expect to act as some kind of watchdog or advocates for our privacy, freedom, and to fight for common humanity's rights to social media communication networks.

To be sure, the infant is well taken care of. When it cries for food, it is fed with a seemingly rich diet of infotainment.

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When it cries with the likes and the shares of consumer complaints, discontent, and revolutions, it is assured that their citizen journalism and clicktivism have an impact in the world, and when it is bored, there are only too many articles to read, to share, to debate, to like, and to follow to our heart's content.

All the world's fragmented efforts, such as hashtag activism, online campaigns, or even thousands of people protesting in the street outside a government building or camping in a square, and the best of critical academic literature pulled together, cannot reverse the social media infantilism currently produced and reproduced in an endless loop of boredom escapism. We are on social media to deflect death and capital in Baudrillard's (1993) symbolic exchange, aimed at the maintenance of hierarchies. We live in networks, and we still behave in hierarchical modes restrained by borders, by states, and by socially constructed irrelevancies. Yet, we are where we are, and there is a need as scholars to produce critical work, which can bite like Socrates' (in Plato's [c. 360 B.C.] Apology) "gadfly" (μύωψ, *mýops*). To bite that opportunistic, saturated, and salacious social media research dimwitted horse, currently galloping over the media and communication field. The gadfly cometh! It is about time!

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Author Biography

Athina Karatzogianni (PhD, Nottingham) is a Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication at the University of Leicester. Her research focuses on the intersections between new media theory, resistance networks, and global politics, for the study of cyberconflict and the use of digital technologies by social movements, protest, and insurgency groups.